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## ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the educational responsibility of changing present negative attitudes toward the aging process and toward aged persons. In spite of the dramatic increase in the number of older people, contemporary influences foster a belief that aging is a process of decline rather than of fulfillment. These influences include the social isolation of the young from the old and the media, which either ignore the presence of older persons or treat them as caricatures. The task of education is to challenge current myths toward aging and to replace them with truth. In order to be effective, information should be transmitted through values exploration, case studies, simulations, role playing, and direct contact. The topic of aging should be part of a study of the whole life span and should be integrated into the curriculum at both elementary and secondary levels. The subject may be interdisciplinary in nature and should aid students to (1) become aware of the "longevity revolution" and how it is changing the age mix of society, (2) empathize with problems faced by older persons, (3) understand that "young" and "old" are relative terms, (4) understand that people can live full and active lives at all ages, and (5) understand that the status of age groups varies from one society to another. A list of activities, audiovisual resources, general references, and relevant organizations is included. (KC)

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## Perspectives on Aging

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### The Longevity Revolution

Americans are gradually becoming aware of a silent revolution that has been going on for many years. This revolution has the power to challenge and change many of our basic attitudes, values, policies, and institutions. It has been popularly referred to as the "graying of America." We prefer to call it the "longevity revolution."

Very simply, the revolution consists of a dramatic increase in human life expectancy, an increase which is enlarging both the number and proportion of older people in our midst. It has been brought about mainly by medical advances which, although they have not actually increased the normal human life span, have greatly improved people's chances of living out their full life potential. In short, people don't die as easily as they used to.

Since the turn of the century, the total population of the country has tripled; but the over-65 population has grown seven times, to a total of more than 20 million people. And still the revolution goes on! The birth rate is declining, but children born today have the promise of longer lives than those of any previous generation. In 1900 the average life expectancy was 47. Boys born in 1977 are expected to live to an average 72 years, girls to the age of 81.

The longevity revolution may be regarded with fascination, disinterest, or horror. We may consider it a great achievement of modern science and look forward to our

own long and happy lives; or we may worry about what society is going to do with all those "old folks." How we look upon this revolution, and what we do about it, will depend largely on our perceptions of what it means to be old and how we perceive ourselves as aging persons. Obviously, this revolution has profound implications for all of us; but they are particularly important to the young in our classrooms, who will be dealing with this revolution throughout their lives. It therefore seems appropriate to check out the current attitudes of young people toward older people and old age.

### Attitudes Toward Aging

Some students in a suburban high school were asked to list terms describing themselves as they thought they would be between the ages of sixty and seventy. The results clearly showed that most young people look upon old age as a bad scene. Among the terms they typically listed were "old geezer," "feeble," "senile," "old biddy," "old goat," "arthritic" and "fuddy-duddy." Several students simply listed themselves as being "dead" or a "corpse" at age seventy. Repetition of this simple experiment in other schools produced similar results.

The fact that these attitudes also prevail among younger children has been demonstrated by a more comprehensive research project conducted by the University of Maryland's Center on Aging. This study involved 180 children, ages three to 11, from urban, suburban, and rural backgrounds. These children typically described old people as having passive roles, suffering from physical ailments, and needing help from others. They said that old people "are wrinkled up," "have gray hair," "are short," "talk funny," and suffer from "heart attacks," "sprained backs," and "arthritis." Only 11 percent of the children had anything good to say about growing old themselves.

**Roots of the Problem.** American society and Western culture in general have always manifested ambivalent attitudes toward aging and elders. On one hand, there is the image of wisdom, serenity, and gentleness that is reflected in such euphemisms for old age as the "golden" or "twilight" years. Longfellow expressed it this way:

*For age is opportunity no less  
Than youth itself, though in another dress,  
And as the evening twilight fades away  
The sky is filled with stars, invisible by day.*

Contrary to this idyllic view of aging, however, there is the concept of aging as a process of decline. Shakespeare, in *As You Like It*, described the "seventh" (and last) age of a man as:

*... second childishness, and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

The idea that aging means degeneration, and that it leads to a state of dependency, has been a pervasive theme of Western literature for centuries. It is not surprising that one of the fears most commonly expressed by people of all ages is that old age will mean "second childishness" or becoming a "burden to others." Compare this to the time of the American Revolution, when it was customary for people to pretend to be older than they were; for example, by powdering their hair or wearing white wigs!

**Contemporary Influences.** If our culture provides both negative and positive themes from which to choose, why

is it that negative attitudes are so prevalent among the young today? We should first recognize that young people are not unique in holding predominantly negative attitudes about aging—Americans of all ages, including the elderly, are more likely to view aging as a process of decline than as one of fulfillment. But there are a number of forces at work today that particularly reinforce negative stereotypes of aging among the young.

One result of the longevity revolution is that today's children are far more likely to have living grandparents than were children of earlier times. In 1970, 71 percent of all ten-year-old children had four living grandparents, as compared to only 11 percent in 1920. Ironically, while children are more likely to have living grandparents, they are less likely to know them well. Today's families are highly mobile, moving on the average of once every five years; and nowadays when families move, grandparents usually have no reason or desire to move with their offspring. Older people are heavily concentrated in the rural areas and central cities, while the proportion of younger people is higher in the suburbs, where children often have no older people around who might serve as surrogate grandparents. To the extent that young people do have contact with older citizens, their contacts are likely to be transitory and impersonal.

Even when they live in close proximity, groups which are socially isolated from one another typically develop misconceptions about one another. This is true whether the isolation is due to religion, race, ethnicity, or age. Ageism, like racism, feeds on such misconceptions.

**Transmission of Ageism.** Prejudice toward age is transmitted through a variety of media; but, in terms of its impact on the young, television is probably the most potent medium of all. One estimate has it that by the time young people reach high school, they have already spent about 10,000 to 15,000 hours in front of a television screen. Much of what they see and hear, in both regular programs and commercials, teaches them that it is bad to grow old. Older characters are frequently cast in roles that are essentially caricatures—such familiar stereotypes as the absent-minded professor, the intrusive mother-in-law, or the senile and doddering old fool. Much of the advertising on television is devoted to products designed to keep people looking young. Commercials use youthful actors to sell everything from soup to sports cars, while older characters are used to advertise life insurance, dental adhesives, and laxatives. Pressure is being brought upon both broadcasters and advertisers to present a fairer image of older people; but so long as society holds the view that it is bad to grow old, it can hardly be expected that the commercially-oriented media will serve as the vanguard for change.

Stories and picture-books are another powerful medium through which the perceptions of young children are shaped. Dr. Edward F. Ansello made an extensive study of children's first literature and found it heavily laden with age stereotyping and ageism. Out of 656 books examined, 83 percent contained no older characters at all, and in less than four percent of the books was an older person the main character. Older characters, when they were found, were generally portrayed as "relatively unimportant, unimaginative and unexciting." The most commonly used adjective to describe older people was the single word "old" (used almost three-fourths of the time), and the most common personality descriptors were "poor" and "sad."

Thus, it is hardly surprising that young people grow up thinking that it is unavoidably bad to grow old. Unfortu-

nately, such attitudes can develop into self-fulfilling prophecies that affect not only the way individuals themselves age, but also the way they react toward those who are aged.

### What Educators Can Do

Fortunately, attitudes can be changed. The way people perceive aging and elders can be affected by altering the content and the message of the mass media, by providing more opportunities for intergenerational contact, and by extensive efforts to provide the public with accurate information. Our perceptions are most easily formed when we are young, and they are somewhat more difficult to change after we have lived with a certain mindset for a number of years. The situation clearly presents a challenge and opportunity to all educators, but particularly to those at the pre-college levels.

**Replace Misinformation with Information.** One of the first tasks of education about aging is to challenge certain widespread myths and replace them with truth. The following questions and answers illustrate some of the needs in this direction.

- Do people become old at age 65? When Germany began the first comprehensive social welfare programs about a century ago, 65 was set as the qualifying age for old-age benefits. Other nations followed Germany's example, and people began to think of attaining the 65th birthday as the rite of passage to old age. But aging is like history; it never happens overnight. Each person ages at a different rate and in a highly individual manner. Even gerontologists, the people who study aging, have no commonly accepted definition of "old."
- Do older people become sickly and inactive? Older people are more likely to have chronic ailments, but these are usually treatable and do not interfere with a person's living a normal life. Moreover, older people are sometimes less susceptible to acute illnesses because of the immunities they have developed over the years. People who follow good health habits and keep physically active throughout their lives usually find that they have no problem staying active when they become older.
- Do most older people live in nursing homes? Less than five percent of the present population over 65 is confined to institutions such as nursing homes, although an estimated 25 percent will spend some time in such institutions before they die. The average stay is approximately three years. The vast majority of older people live in their own homes and provide for their own needs. Probably many, if not most, nursing-home patients could live at home if certain basic services were provided. The practice of providing such home care is rapidly growing as an alternative to nursing-home care.
- Is old age accompanied by a decline in memory and intelligence? There are different kinds of memory, and while studies show that there is some decline in short-term memory as people age, there is also an improvement in long-term memory. Usually whatever decline takes place in memory functions as people age is not sufficient to interfere with learning. The time required to recognize, analyze, and react to a problem tends to increase with age; and this seems to be the main reason why older people generally score lower

on intelligence tests. When sufficient time is provided, older people score as highly on intelligence tests as younger people do.

Debunking myths by presenting new information is one worthwhile approach to this subject, but information alone is not sufficient to combat deeply entrenched attitudes. These can be changed only when more human elements are introduced through such means as values exploration, case studies, simulations and role playing, and direct contact with older people.

**Values Clarification.** There is no shortage of activities for exploring values about aging, and with a little imagination such activities can easily be developed. One simple activity is to ask students to list, anonymously, ten terms they might use to describe old people. When this is completed (and not before), ask them to place a plus sign next to each term which has a positive connotation, a minus sign next to each negative term, and a zero next to each term that is neutral. When all the students have done this, ask them to analyze the results of what they have done and to write a paragraph explaining what the exercise reveals about their own attitudes toward old age. After collecting and shuffling the papers, tabulate on the chalkboard the number of plus, minus, and zero symbols for the entire class. Read the paragraphs and discuss such questions as: (1) Is there any general attitudinal pattern for the class? (2) Where have the attitudes come from? (3) Do the attitudes conform to the reality of old age?

**Simulations and Role Playing.** There are various ways of helping students develop empathy for some of the problems that plague many older people, such as physical ailments or financial straits. To simulate cataracts, eyeglasses may be covered with Scotch tape, leaving only a small slit of clear glass open for reading. Hearing difficulties may be simulated by having students perform an assignment according to instructions which have been tape-recorded and are played back at very low volume, preferably in an area where distracting sounds increase the difficulty of hearing. Riding in a wheelchair or getting about with a tubular "walker" can give students some understanding of the difficulties of limited mobility.

An economic simulation may take the form of a budget exercise. Given a certain fixed income, such as a pension, students may be asked to work out a budget based on current costs in their own area for food, utilities, rent, transportation, etc. Once the budget is worked out, an inflation factor may be added in, with no increase in income. It then becomes the students' job to revise the budget and decide what to do without in order to adjust to the rising cost of living.

When using such activities, the teacher should somehow make it clear to students that such activities do not really simulate old age; they simply simulate some of the health or economic problems that people may experience at any age. The fact that they are more common to older people does not by any means suggest that poor health and poverty are intrinsic to old age. Activities of this type should always be used in conjunction with other activities that convey a more balanced view of what it means to grow old.

**Intergenerational Contact.** Films, stories, and case studies focusing on older people are good ways to bring a personal dimension to the study of aging. However, they are not as good as actually bringing older and younger people together. One way of doing this is to invite some senior citizens to the classroom for discussion with the students on topics of mutual interest. It

often comes as a surprise to both young and old to find that they have much in common. Transportation problems, limited pocket money, and age discrimination are difficulties that both young and old frequently face. Both groups are likely to find themselves at a disadvantage in the job market. Young people, accustomed to being told they are "too young" for this or that, can easily empathize with others who are considered "too old" for one thing or another. An intergenerational discussion might revolve around the issue of age discrimination by using the following questions:

1. Have any members of the group (young or old) ever experienced age discrimination? If so, under what circumstances?
2. Are there any ways in which age discrimination works in favor of old or young (e.g., lowered fares for public transportation, discounts for senior citizens or students in stores and theaters, tax breaks, etc.)?
3. Should an amendment be added to the Constitution forbidding discrimination on the basis of age?

**Human Resources.** Another good way to bring young and old into contact is to use older people as resources for learning. This can be done by bringing elders into the schools to demonstrate some craft or skill or to speak on topics on which they are knowledgeable. It can also be done through oral history projects in which students interview elders.

One way of doing this is to choose some historical event that has taken place in this century, and to invite older citizens (preferably from various social classes and backgrounds) into the classroom to be interviewed. For example, the topic for the week might be the "Great Depression of the 1930s," with each day devoted to discussion of one particular sub-topic. The sub-topics might include the stock market crash of 1929, the election of 1932, the programs of the New Deal, and the impact of the Depression on the family. One day should be set aside for discussing such follow-up questions as: (1) What did we learn through "remembered history" that we would not have learned from textbooks? (2) What advantages and disadvantages do oral interviews have for the study of history?

**Volunteer Services.** Volunteer programs can be a two-way street. They may involve senior citizens serving students, as in tutoring programs, or they may involve young people performing various chores or services for older people. Either can be a powerful means for breaking down age barriers and overcoming age stereotypes.

Some elementary-school classes have adopted "grandparents" from the community, who periodically visit the classroom to serve as aides or simply to be with the children. The Retired Senior Volunteer Program (R.S.V.P.) has been organized in communities across the country, and many of these volunteers work with the schools. In the absence of an organized R.S.V.P. chapter, there is always some organized group representing older people, such as a Council on Aging, which can be of help in arranging for volunteer services.

### Aging in the Curriculum

Ideally, the topic of aging deserves consideration at all levels of the K-12 curriculum. It should be included in many subject areas, and it should be concerned with the whole life span rather than simply with old age. This is not only because the topic is so important to society, but also because our own perceptions of ourselves as aging

persons and of other age groups develop gradually as an intrinsic part of the maturation process.

Consideration should be given to both active and passive learning. That is, there should be deliberate efforts to educate about aging, and there should also be concern about unintentional factors in the learning environment which influence the mind of the learner. What kinds of images of people at various ages are presented in the textbook illustrations, films, and other media used in the classroom? Do the school and community provide adequate opportunities for people of all ages to interact? Subtle influences like these may be as powerful in what they teach as the formal curriculum for which deliberate planning is made. Teachers may not be able to change some of the factors in the learner's environment; but at least if they are aware of them, they may be able to plan some corrective or compensatory measures.

**Setting Goals.** Planning for the classroom should proceed from carefully considered goals that are appropriate to the grade level, the subject matter, and the needs and interests of the learners. From these general goals, specific objectives can be developed for particular learning activities. Here are ten general goals that might be considered for social studies.

1. To become aware of the longevity revolution and how it is changing the age mix of society.
2. To understand why the longevity revolution is taking place and what implications it has for the individual and society.
3. To recognize ageism—what it is, where it comes from, and how it is passed on in society.
4. To empathize with the problems faced by many elderly people because of their age, and to recognize how these problems relate to social attitudes and policies.
5. To understand that people can live full and active lives at all ages, and that old age can be a time of great creativity and accomplishment.
6. To understand that aging is a highly individual process, and that "young" and "old" are relative terms.
7. To recognize that individuals can have considerable control over the aging process, and that one can make economic, physical, and psychological preparations for a "good old age."
8. To have greater respect and better understanding of other age groups, and to be able to relate to them and interact with them more easily.
9. To understand that the aging process and the status of age groups vary from one society to another, and are closely related to cultural patterns.
10. To recognize and consider alternatives for the future that would provide the best possible life for people of all ages, and especially the elderly.

**Fitting the Topic In.** Teaching about aging does not necessarily require major additions to already overcrowded curricula, but may be accomplished largely through substitution. For example, if a literature class is studying the short story, why not use short stories featuring older characters interacting with the young? An economics lesson on the concept of "supply and demand" could just as easily focus on the issue of mandatory retirement as on the price of steel or coffee. Biology classes can learn about the human life cycle as they learn about the life cycles of plants and animals. In this fashion vast improvements can be made within existing programs simply by changing the emphasis and some of the content of what is already being taught.

One distinct advantage the topic of aging offers for the curriculum is that the subject is very interdisciplinary. Within the social studies, such questions as the following might be considered:

**History:** What changes in the past fifty years have particularly influenced the lives of older people? Have these changes improved or worsened the situation of the elderly?

**Political Science:** What kinds of legislation are needed at federal and state levels to assure social justice for the senior population? Which political organizations most actively represent senior citizens?

**Economics:** How does inflation affect the elderly as compared to other age groups? In a situation of constant inflation, is it possible for a worker to make adequate financial preparations for retirement?

**Sociology:** Is American society biased toward youth rather than toward age? Do our basic institutions (family, law, religion, education, etc.) best meet the needs of the young or the old?

**Psychology:** Does aging affect the mind, and, if so, how? What can the individual do to maintain optimum mental health throughout life?

**Anthropology:** How do the various types of societies (primitive, traditional, modern) categorize people according to age? In each type of society, how does age affect a person's status and role?

Besides the fact that the topic of aging fits into the various social science disciplines, it should not be overlooked that it also relates to areas outside the social studies. One interesting possibility that the study of aging opens up is that teachers from different departments might work together as an interdisciplinary team. The language arts teacher might deal with images of aging in literature (Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*) while the fine arts teacher deals with images in art (Rembrandt's many self-portraits) and music (The Beatles, "When I'm Sixty-four," or Elton John, "Sixty Years On"). The possibilities are endless, and any of these works from literature and the fine arts might provide the motif for students' compositions on their own perceptions of aging. Science could be brought into it by comparing the aging process in humans and other living things. Demographic studies of birth and death rates, population growth, and the changing age mix of society in various countries of the world could serve the interests of mathematics. Calculators or computers might be used to make predictions of the future which, in turn, might be used for discussions led by the social studies teacher.

**Maintaining a Balance.** When planning activities for the classroom, it is important to have sufficient variety to present a balanced view of aging, or at least to present diverse situations. The temptation to focus only on the "plight of the elderly" or the "problems of old age" should be avoided at all costs. If students are already convinced that it is bad to grow old, it would be a disservice to present activities that would further convince them that this is so. Whatever is done to develop student empathy for the problems of older people should be combined with efforts to present old age in a more favorable light. Students should be made aware that growing old can be a liberating experience—a time when people, freed from the daily responsibilities of job and family, can finally do some of the things that could not

have been done earlier. They should know that many people, even in advanced old age, live happy, active, and creative lives. Most importantly, they should understand that their own future as aging persons will depend largely on the preparations they make and the lifestyles they choose while they are young.

### Sources of Activities

In spite of the fact that the topic of aging is relatively new to the pre-college classroom, there is a variety of materials available which contain worthwhile learning activities. Among them are the following. (Prices may have changed.)

*Comparative View of Aging.* By Gary R. Smith. Second Revised Edition, 1975. 96 pp. \$4.00. Center for Teaching International Relations, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80210. Contains 18 sets of activities suited mainly to the secondary level but, in some cases, adaptable to elementary grades as well.

*Cycle: An Interaction Unit.* \$12.00. Interact, P. O. Box 262, Lakeside, CA 92040. A simulation game for 25-30 players based on the theories of Erik Erikson.

*The Elderly in America.* By William Cole and Diana K. Harris. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1977. 65 pp. \$16.00 (set of 10). A short text for students at the secondary level.

*Teaching About Aging.* By Fran Pratt. 1976. 75 pp. \$2.75. Social Science Education Consortium, 855 Broadway, Boulder, CO 80302. Contains rationale for teaching, extensive activities for elementary and secondary level, tips on establishing goals and objectives and evaluation outcomes, and lengthy bibliography.

*Views of Aging: A Teachers' Guide.* By Marcia J. Cameron. 1976. 179 pp. \$5.50. Institute of Gerontology, University of Michigan, 543 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48104. Sets forth a design for a unit on aging which might be adapted to a variety of subjects. Also contains "mini-units" for particular subjects as well as useful appendices and bibliographies.

*Youth Looks at Aging.* By H. Lee Jacobs. Second Edition, 1969. 51 pp. \$1.00. Institute of Gerontology, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52240. Designed for a three- to four-week unit at the secondary level, this booklet examines 18 basic questions about aging and offers suggestions for activities and materials related to each question. Includes a useful bibliography of print materials and films.

### Audio-visual Resources

*The Ending.* Schloat Production, 150 White Plains Rd., Tarrytown, NY 10591. Filmstrip with program guide and record, \$23.00; with cassette, \$26.00. Portrays the needs and attitudes of the elderly and the "wall of fear that emerges between people of diverse ages." Story centers on a young girl who takes time to help an old man home on a hot day.

*How Would You Like to Be Old?* Guidance Associates, 757 Third Ave., New York, NY 10017. Two filmstrips with discussion guide and records, \$41.50; with cassettes, \$46.50. Part I deals with problems of the elderly in society. Part II illustrates the "creativity and vigor which can mark later years" and "underscores the special understanding often shared by aged people and the young."

*Living with Aging.* Documentary Photo Aids, P. O. Box 956, Mount Dora, FL 32757. \$17.00. A set of 28 photo aids, 11" x 14", which present through live photographs and cartoons the problems of the elderly in society. Teacher's Guide included.

*Our Elders: A Generation Neglected.* Prentice Hall Media, 150 White Plains Rd., Tarrytown, NJ 10591. \$45.00. Two color, sound filmstrips with records or cassettes. Examines the problems of the elderly from the standpoint of American attitudes and values which lead to social neglect and economic discrimination.

*About Aging: A Catalog of Films.* Compiled by Margaret E. Neiswender. Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center, University of Southern California, University Park, Los Angeles, CA 90007. 88 pp. \$3.25.

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- Curtin, Sharon R. *Nobody Ever Died of Old Age*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1973. \$6.95. (Little, Brown and Co., paperback, \$2.95.)
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- Saul, Shura. *Aging: An Album of People Growing Old*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1974. \$4.95 paperback.

**Organizations**

- American Association of Retired Persons and National Retired Teachers Association, 1989 K Street, NW, Washington, DC 20049. (202) 872-4700.
- Gray Panthers, 3700 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. (215) 387-0918.
- Jewish Association for Services for the Aged, 222 Park Avenue, South, New York NY 10003. (212) 677-2530.
- KWIC Training Resources in Aging Project, Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development, Duke University, Box 3003, DUMC, Durham, NC 27710. (919) 684-3058.
- National Council of Senior Citizens, 1911 K Street, NW, Room 202, Washington, DC 20005. (202) 783-6850.
- National Council on the Aging, 1828 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036. (202) 223-6250.
- Retired Senior Volunteer Program, ACTION, 806 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20525. (202) 655-4000.

**NOTE:** This *How To Do It* Notebook Series 2, designed for a loose-leaf binder, provides a practical and useful source of classroom methods and techniques for elementary and secondary social studies teachers. The titles now available in Series 2 are: *Improving Reading Skills in Social Studies*, *Effective Use of Films in Social Studies Classrooms*, *Reach for a Picture*, *Using Questions in Social Studies*, and *Architecture as a Primary Source for Social Studies*. Price per copy, \$1.00. Quantity discounts: 10-49 copies, 10%; 50-99 copies, 15%; 100 or more copies, 20%. Payment must accompany all orders except those on official institutional purchase order forms. Order from the NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES, 2030 M Street, N.W., Suite 400, Washington, D.C. 20036.